



Bhagoji Naik: The Unsung Bhil Warrior Of The 1857 Revolt

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The revolt of 1857, often referred to as the First War of Indian Independence, was a monumental event in the history of British colonial rule in India. It marked the commencement of several revolts against British colonial rule. Although the military, political, and social aspects of the uprising have received a lot of attention in the academic discourse and historical narrative, the Adiwasli community leaders and common peoples as well as their contribution towards Indian freedom movement have been overlooked in historical narratives.

There are many evidences in the archival sources and oral tradition that tribal leaders such as Teelaka Manjhi, Siddhu, Kanhu Murmu (All from Santhal Community), Ramaji Bhangare, Raghoji Bhangare, Veer Baburao Shedmake, Honaji Kengale, Rama Kirava, Alluri SitaramaRaju (1897 – 1924), Tantya Bhill, KhajyaNaik, Veer Bhagwan Birsa Munda, Shama Dada Kolam, Nagya Katkari, Panchi Dhurve etc. fought non-violently and sometimes armed struggle against the exploiting moneylenders, landlords and the British rule. Also tribal warrior women like Phulo, Jhano (Santhal community), Gaya Munda's Wife Maki Munda (Jhrakhand), Dashriben Chaudhary (Gujarat), Rani Bangara Devi (Orissa), Jhalkarin Bai, Avantibai, Jijabai Bhangare (Maharashtra) etc. were also actively involved in this freedom struggle. But their role and contribution in freedom struggle movement has not been given recognition in the historical description and in academic discourse. Among these, Bhagoji Naik, a Bhil chieftain from Western India, is notable for having his strong opposition to British policies; particularly the imposition of high taxes and military conscription and exploitation of money lenders, landlords, and agent, contractors was a crucial element of the 1857 uprising and serves as an illustration of the complex nature of the movement. His resistance activities in western India was crucial in influencing local uprisings and undermining British rule, both strategically and as a leader of freedom fighters.

This paper seeks to delve into Bhagoji Naik's role in the independence movement by examining his leadership within the Bhil community, his participation in the 1857 revolt, and his strategic resistance to British forces in the region. Renowned for his unconventional tactics in battle and staunch resistance to British colonial rule, Naik's efforts, especially in the Western India (Khandesh, Nashik and Ahmednagar) region of contemporary Maharashtra, signify a crucial juncture in India's pursuit for independence. This paper also explores his pivotal function within the larger context of the 1857 uprising, highlighting his efforts to bring together tribal communities and the indigenous tactics utilized to confront British forces.

Historical Context and Background

Historically, the Bhils, one of India's largest ancient tribal communities, were disadvantaged and excluded from mainstream political processes due to British colonial control. They live in large numbers in the central and western India i.e. Rajasthan, Gujarat, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra. The habitat of the Bhil community living in this geographical region was known as 'Bhilwara'.ⁱ These areas have also been specified as Scheduled Areas under the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution. According to the census of 1971 the total population of the Bhils was 38,38,002 and in Maharashtra it was 5,75,022.ⁱⁱ Many scholars consider Bhil tribal community as the original inhabitants (*Bhoomi Putra*) of the Indian sub-continent. In the census reports of 1891, 1901, and 1911 the Bhils are described as animists.ⁱⁱⁱ Means they worship every element or nature and they consider that nature is supernatural power and hence nature is everything in their life.

Many references to the existence and achievement of Bhil tribal community can be found in the Katha Sagar (600 A.D.), ancient Vedic literature and Great Epics, Bhagavat and Shiv Puran and also in Jain Works named KuvlaymalaKaha. The word 'Bhil' appears to have come from the Dravidian word "Beel" which means bow. The term also suggests its rapidity and vitality. Bhils are expert bowmen, and their arrows fly straight.

^{iv}The Cambridge History of India states that the word "Bhil" appears to have come from the Dravidian words "Villu" or "Billu," which indicates a bow. In several ancient Tamil poets' works, a Bowman called "Villuvar" is

used to describe some northern tribal people. ^v Eklavya in Bhil community was excellent in archery. Example found in various ancient literature, most of the persons in Bhil community are the expert in archery also in contemporary times in India. Instance, National Champion archer Dinesh Bhil from Gujarat who invited to train probationary IAS & IPS officer in The Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration (LBSNAA) Mussoori. ^{vi}

Bhil Revolt

This brief narrative highlights the role played by leaders of the Bhil tribal community in resisting British rule and the different forms of exploitation by landowners and moneylenders in western and central India. When the East India Company came to power in 1818, its political strategy was centered on making money off from the once-wealthy Khandesh region, which was rich in natural resources. Due to famine, economic distress, against exploitation by moneylenders and landlords, contractors and policies of British East India Company, forcefully conversion in Christianity also exploitation of the traditional Water, forest and land rights (*Jal, Jungale and JaminAdhikar*) of the tribal communities in this area the resistance was seen. They had to resist and struggle many times with landlords, moneylenders and the British to preserve and conserve their culture and also their fundamental rights. In 1818–19, the struggle began as a jungle battle, but it changed over time to become an infringement and looting of British state assets, which annoyed the highest echelons of British government until 1860. From 1817 to 1881, these hilly areas of central and western part of India saw three major and many minor Bhil uprisings under strong leadership of Bhima Naik and Kazi Singh (Khaja Naik). ^{vii}

Khandesh, in the beginning, was a part of Ahmednagar district. In the year 1849, Khandesh was conquered by the British, and a separate district was created. Col. Briggs, Political Agent to the British Government counted the number of Bhils in Khandesh in the year 1818 as the total population. It is said to be eight percent out of all Khandesh population. In 1833, British officer W.S. Boyd says that 55,000 thousand Bhils live in Khandesh. ^{viii} Most of the Bhil peoples lived under the leadership of their chief known as Naik. Bhil Naiks treated themselves as kings and had more than hundreds of followers in Bhil tribal belt area. The Bhil tribe, who resided in the Khandesh situated in Satpura, Satmala, and Ajantha mountain ranges, rose up in resistance against the British authority and began targeting the areas they controlled.

The Bhil tribe started to revolt against British control in 1819 from all directions. With the use of several mountains, a large number of Bhil Naik's sought refuge therein and then they began targeting areas in Khandesh that were under British using guerilla tactics. Rup Singh Naik, and Khandu Naik, both brothers Ramji and Uchit Naik seized control of hilly western region of Khandesh. At the same time, Kanya, Dashrath and Dhanaji Naik revolted against the British at various places in Khandesh province. But the British government suppressed the revolt of the Bhil Naik's by using the policy of *Sama-Dam-Danda-Bheda* (Divide and rule policy). But new Naiks of the Bhil tribe came forward and started revolting against colonial government. ^{ix}

To suppress the Bhil uprising and establish strong British rule in western India and particularly in Khandesh province, Mount Stuart Elphinstone, the Commissioner of Bombay Province, devised a two-pronged plan. They were- 1) to establish Bhil farming colonies and 2) to create Bhil battalions (Corp). Colonel Robertson, the Collector of Khandesh, was asked to form a Bhil Corp. under the orders of Mount Stuart Elphinstone. ^x He appointed Lieutenant James Otram for the formation of the Khandesh Bhil Corp as per direction of the Commissioner of Bombay Province. Otram very cleverly devised various tricks to establish the Bhil Corp. Between 1825 and 1830 he continued to make desperate efforts to win the confidence of the Bhils. For that he went to the Bhil region and stayed for 12 to 15 days. He went to the hill in the forest with the Bhils and started hunting wild animals, participated in the Bhil's cultural gathering and festival. Finally, he succeeded in winning the trust of the Bhil community. Eventually, James Otram formed the Bhil Corp and started suppressing the various uprising of the Bhil tribal communities through the Bhil soldiers, which can be seen in primary sources in various historical documents. ^{xi} In 1827 AD, Chandu Naik, a Bhil revolutionary, revolted against the British government in the Satpura area of Khandesh. But Otram suppressed his uprising with support of Bhil Corps. Captain James Otram says of this battle, "This is the first time that the Bhils in my orp shed blood for their lord (British). They took the opportunity and fought for us against their own tribe." ^{xii} In other words, the British destroyed the struggle of the powerful and strong Bhil community by using their own brothers.

The Rise of Bhagoji Naik

Bhagoji Naik, a native of Nasik, Maharashtra, became one of the most prominent Bhil leaders in the Nasik-Ahmadnagar area after quitting his job as an Ahmednagar police soldier (Bhil Corps) to engage in anti-British activities.

According to the 1883 Nashik Gazette of Bombay Province, tribal revolutionary Bhagoji Naik was born on 1804 at Nandur Shingote in Ahmednagar district. ^{xiii} His father was a Kotwal but he could not afford to get

an education as the family economical situation was very poor. So Bhagoji used to tend cattle with his companions since childhood. While wandering in the wild forest, he became adept in the arts of swinging a stick and an expert in archery. Once a young calf in his herd was attacked by a tiger, Bhagoji attacked the tiger to protect it. He killed the tiger only with the help of an axe. This appreciation of his bravery spread across Ahmednagar areas.

Realizing that Bhagoji was very brave and valiant, the British authorities at Ahmednagar appointed him as *Jamadar* in the Ahmednagar Police Corp. He was getting a salary of twenty rupees a month.^{xiv} Meanwhile, there was a theft near Bhagoji's village. While investigating this as a police jamadar, he was accused of destroying evidence of thieves and also helping tribal revolutionaries. Bhagoji was arrested and sentenced to one and a half years in prison on the charge of helping the tribal revolutionaries of that area by obstructing the work of the British police.^{xv}

After Bhagoji's release a year later, he was given a condition to write a certificate of loyalty to the British government and surrender his arms to the government. So, as Bhagoji realized the secret treachery policy of the British, he left his Nandur Shingote village and took refuge on a mountain one kilometer away from the village. There he formed a group of 50 youths of the Bhil tribe and decided to resist strongly with the foreign British rule.^{xvi}

The Role of Bhagoji Naik in the Revolt of 1857

On October 1857, there were 30 Armed Constables and 20 Revenue Constables under the command of the British Superintendent of Police, J.W Henry. Henry sent a message to Bhagoji Naik on behalf of the Mamledar at Sangamner and Sinnar (Nashik) asking him to surrender.

However, Bhagoji Naik replied to the Mamledars, "I will not give up until the British government pays my salary for two years and accepts the demands for justice and rights of the tribal people of Ahmednagar area."^{xvii} Bhagoji Naik's counter message enraged the British police officer Henry who ordered his troops to launch an armed raid on Bhagoji. A fierce battle started between Bhagoji and his Bhil youth group and the British soldiers, in which Bhagoji Naik's firing, killed a fellow soldier behind Henry and also killed Henry's horse. He was consequently shot dead after falling from his horse. Later Colonel

Thachar and Taylor continued this battle.^{xviii} As news spread that Bhagoji and his associates had slain Henry and other British commanders and soldiers in this battle, the Bhil and Mahadev Koli tribal community, who were engaged in combat with the British rule, became excited and many more tribal youth inspired to participate in anti-British movement under the leadership of Bhagoji.

Again during October 1857, Bhagoji's prowess was inspired by Patharaji alias Purthaji Naik in Rahuri taluka of Ahmednagar District by forming a contingent of one hundred Bhils and started battle against the British troops. But British officer General Montgomery suppressed Purthaji Naik's revolt.^{xix}

Guerrilla warfare was a key tactic used by Bhagoji Naik. He campaigned in the dense jungles and hills of Ahmednagar, Nashik area, launching surprise attacks against British forces, supply convoys, and local administrative offices. The British found it difficult to stop him since he was able to move swiftly and avoid capture due to his geographical knowledge with the area.^{xx}

On 18 October 1857, near Samsherpur in Akole taluka of Ahmednagar District, Bhagoji Naik and his colleagues engaged in a fierce battle with the 26th Native Infantry under the command of Colonel Mencken. This created great panic among Lt. Graham and F.S. Chauffman of the Civil Service who were involved in this battle. Therefore, the British government immediately appointed Captain Nuttall in place of Lieutenant Graham and entrusted him with the responsibility of crushing Bhagoji's uprising. At the same time Captain Nuttall conspired to unite the Mahadev Koli's Akole, Junnar (Ahmednagar district) and Nashik and set up the 'Mahadev Koli Corp' to pit the tribal Mahadev Koli people against his own tribal Bhil community to completely destroy the uprising of Bhagoji and the entire Bhil community.^{xxi}

On 19 February 1858, Major Patter and Captain Nuttall attacked Bhagoji Naik again with 481 joint soldiers of Ahmednagar Police Corp, Deccan Koli Corp and Poona Horse Corp. In this battle, 40 colleagues of Bhagoji Naik were got martyred while five colleagues were captured by the British force. One soldier of the British was killed and three were injured.^{xxii} But Bhagoji Naik did not fall into the hands of the British forces.

On July 5, 1859, Bhagoji Naik and his accomplice Hirji Naik engaged Captain Nuttall's forces in battle eight miles southeast of Sangamner. During this incident, Bhagoji's followers forced 25 Sepoys to flee and killed 10 Deccan Koli Corp sepoys. But Bhagoji Naik's son Yashwant was injured and Hirji Naik along with the three were arrested.^{xxiii}

Due to Bhagoji's anti-British activities and his huge successes, his allies were increasing day by day and it became imperative for the British government to defeat him at any cost. According to a letter dated November 5, 1859 by Magistrate C.E. Traser Sytter of Ahmednagar to the Secretary of the Judicial Department, Bombay, on hearing that Bhagoji Naik had increased the number of his associates, Captain Nuttall, along with Lieutenant Davis and soldiers, attacked Bhagoji.^{xxiv} In the battles at Ambardhara and Akole near Visarhira (Yevlataluka) near Nandur Shingote Peth in Sinnar taluka, Anka Tankai near Sangamner, Bhagoji had strongly resisted the injustice-tyranny of the British Government. So, in

order to defeat Bhagoji, Y.H. Souter, the Assistant Superintendent of Police, was given the order by Ahmednagar Police Commissioner A. Bettington.^{xxv}

Using the *Sama-Dam-Dand-Bheda* (Divide and rule tactics), accordingly, on November 11, 1859, Y.H. Souter entrusted the Patil of Panchale village in Ahmednagar District with the responsibility of collecting confidential information about Bhagoji Naik raids. Accordingly, Patil informed the Souter, SP that Bhagoji and his colleagues had taken shelter on the banks of a stream near MithSagare village in Sinnar taluka. He was pleased with this and rewarded Patil with land yielding four hundred rupees per annum for providing confidential information regarding Bhagoji's movement and helping the British.^{xxvi}

On the same day i.e. 11st November, 1859 Souter sent a total of 159 soldiers comprising 91 trained sepoy, 23 untrained sepoy and 45 horsemen to defeat and capture Bhagoji and his associates under the guidance of the Patil of Panchal village who had knowledge of the geographical situation there At MithSagare. British soldiers apprehended Bhagoji on all side of the stream and opened fire on him. ^{xxvii} However, Bhagoji valiantly resisted the British utilizing guerilla warfare with the support of his Bhil youth colleagues. Bhagoji used his gun to wound Souter's horse during this battle, but Souter survived. In addition, he wounded other soldiers and killed British Jamadar and two soldiers.^{xxviii} Finally, due to large amount of British force, after maneuvering from all sides, Bhagoji was caught in a dilemma and killed by British soldiers with gun bullets. He accepted martyrdom but did not surrender to the British in the battlefield on 11st November, 1859. After that, Souter asked Bhagoji's colleagues to surrender but these Bhil heroes fought with the British soldiers till their last breath. In the end, Bhagoji Naik along with 44 colleagues was martyred.^{xxix} In this Bhil struggle, the British also tortured and exploited the women of the Bhil tribe. But the women of Bhagoji's group sacrificed their lives fighting against the inhuman oppression of the British, but they never surrendered to the British.^{xxx}

Thus, Bhagoji protested revolted against exploitative attitude of landlord, moneylenders and the oppressive, inhuman rule of the British government for the basic rights (*Jal, Jamin and Jangle*) of the tribals and to get independence for India. The British suppressed his agitation and resistance with the help of their numerous troops.

Conclusion

In the context of the 1857 uprising, Bhagoji Naik's contribution to the Indian independence movement emphasizes the important but frequently disregarded role of native tribal leaders in the larger fight against British colonial power. He was a pivotal role in uprising of 1857 due to his abilities to organize the Bhil and other tribal community peoples against British forces and his leadership and use of guerrilla tactics, which were essential to the resistance in Western India. Realizing the British Government's diplomacy and their stand against the water, forest and land rights of the tribals, Bhagoji did not accept the high paying job offered to him or surrender, and waged an armed struggle against the injustice of the British, moneylenders and landlords.

He believed that the foreign British had no right to rule over the land of India and that it was his primary duty to eradicate the foreign power and thus he opposed and fought against the British in the revolt of 1857. Even though the uprising was put down in the end, the spirit of resistance that Bhagoji Naik and other leaders promoted persisted in inspiring subsequent revolutions and further contributed to free India from colonial control.

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